

Fort Worth Star-Telegram
1992-08-12
Section: EDITORIAL/VIEWPOINT
Edition: FINAL AM
Page: 20
Column: EDITORIAL

Thermo-Lag
Public deserves a full explanation
Star-Telegram

Yet another allegation of hazardous conditions attaches itself to the seemingly star-crossed Comanche Peak nuclear power plant in Somervell County. You don't have to be a zealous anti-nuclear activist to be concerned and frustrated about the most recent revelations.

After years of ordering corrections in design and construction flaws at the plant near Glen Rose, federal regulators are now being asked by a nuclear watchdog group to shut down Comanche Peak because of a failure in the material used as a fire-retarding barrier to protect critical components of the plant's safety systems. The Nuclear Information and Resource Service of Washington, D.C., points to the results of tests conducted by federal officials, demonstrating that the material, Thermo-Lag, failed to withstand the temperatures necessary to protect wiring and cables in backup systems that shut down a nuclear plant in an emergency. The group said that it fears an American version of Chernobyl if a fire should break out inside a plant and destroy the safety system.

Fort Worth-based Citizens for Fair Utility Regulation, for years an ardent opponent of Comanche Peak, has joined NIRS in demanding that the plant be closed and the Thermo-Lag removed. The maker of the material, Thermal Sciences of St. Louis, has defended its product, arguing that any problems are the result of poor installation or inadequate amounts of the insulation. Representatives of TU Electric, which owns the partially completed plant, say they are conducting their own tests and expect by the fall to increase the amount of Thermo-Lag in the plant to safeguard critical parts of its systems.

All the parties to this controversy are saying what they can be expected to say, including the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which is expressing deep concern, continuing to conduct tests and saying as little as possible about the roughly 10 years the agency has known of alleged problems with Thermo-Lag.

The primary question centers on how real and how serious the problem is. The scientific findings are conflicting, incomplete and therefore inconclusive.

Much of the testing done by Thermal Sciences naturally concludes that the company produces a wonderful product. A series of tests performed last month by the National Institute of Standards and Technology found that the material failed to conform to the specified standards required for withstanding high temperatures.

In our judgment, the benefit of the doubt goes to the institute. The public deserves a full, clear explanation from the NRC of what that test failure means to the safety of the nuclear plant and ultimately to the public - and that explanation should be forthcoming immediately.